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Virág Molnár is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the New School of Social Research in New York. Her scholarly work is centered on the intersections of culture, politics, social change and knowledge production with special focus on urban culture and transformations of the built environment, particularly in Budapest, Berlin, and New York.

Despite the increasing amount of scholarly literature on the architecture of Communist regimes, certain stereotypes about post-World War II Central European architecture still prevail. While such terms as historicism, eclecticism, Art Nouveau, and Bauhaus have received significant attention over the past decades, socialist realism is often used as an umbrella term, denoting virtually everything that has been built in Central and Eastern Europe after the Communist takeover. Thus, the classicizing apartment blocks of the early 1950s are often lumped together with the prefabricated housing projects of the late 1960s, both attesting to a regime that privileged uniformity over diversity and where the state had total control over design and planning. Virág Molnár's book not only debunks such generalizations but also offers a nuanced discussion of the interrelation of the built environment and the state by rendering architecture as a cultural practice whereby the state is "both materially produced and represented" (9). What stands in the focus of her work is therefore not architecture *per se* but rather the role of the architectural profession operating in relation to the state and society. Shifting the discussion from the aesthetic and technological aspects of architecture to its social and cultural implications Molnár challenges the Eastern Bloc's assumed isolation of architectural expertise from Western trends and reveals gray areas of interaction between East and West, government officials and architects, thus foregrounding previously overlooked interrelations between tendencies of regionalism and globalization.

The book is based on case studies from Hungary and East Germany, primarily East Berlin. Molnár justifies her choice of these countries by highlighting Hungary's unique position as a buffer zone between the East and West, while East Germany, and later the reunified Germany, presents an intriguing case of processing both the Nazi and Communist past within the arena of architecture. Molnár's argumentation proceeds chronologically, starting with the reconstruction efforts after World War II and concluding with the fierce architectural debates over the future of post-wall Berlin. Although one may expect a comparative analysis of the two geopolitical areas within each chapter, Molnár offers a more "experimental" (24) approach by analyzing only one country per chapter. By way of abandoning the conventions and requirements of the comparative approach, she seeks to offer a nuanced reading of her case studies as historical ethnographies in their own right, rather than in the service of comparison. As a result, two chapters are dedicated to Hungary and two to East Germany.



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The first chapter surveys the 1950s through the lens of East Germany's rising from the ruins of World War II. The rebuilding of cities and all new architectural projects were carried out under the strict guidance of Soviet directives. Molnár convincingly demonstrates how architecture in this new geopolitical context operated as a tool for political propaganda, particularly in the divided city of Berlin. The streamlined forms of modernism, identified as typically American, cosmopolitan and imperialist, were to be avoided at all cost. Instead, social realism prevailed in East Germany as a weapon of choice against the sleekness of the West, which entailed the revitalization of classicism "as the most genuine repository of progressive German architectural heritage" (42) and remained the dominant style even after the political tide changed in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. Through individual architects Molnár brilliantly illustrates the different ways in which these East German architects negotiated their aesthetic convictions in relation to their political sentiments.

While social realism remained the basic vocabulary of design in East Germany well into the 1960s, in Hungary the 1956 revolution, despite its tragic outcome, brought the winds of change. Modernism was once again embraced and architecture was "converted from a tool of political representation into an instrument of social reform, expected to facilitate a breakthrough in social modernization" (70). The second chapter focuses on two major phenomena in Hungary of the 1960s: the mass production of housing blocks and prefabricated housing projects and the debate surrounding the unbridled spread of privately built family houses all over the country. Regarding the former, Molnár demonstrates the ideological role of the media in educating the population how to live in these new types of multistorey apartment blocks through popular movies and illustrates how the role of the architect turned from artist into engineer over these years. However, many radical ideas were deemed too ambitious and would not be realized. Such was the fate of Elemér Zalotay's internationally acclaimed "strip house" project, a massive apartment complex that would have been at least three kilometers long and forty stories high overlooking the Danube at the northern edge of Buda and sporting a curtain of creeping plants on its façade, among other innovative solutions. The family house debate, by contrast, sheds light on an aspect of socialism that by the 1980s increasingly embraced self-help building and the growing involvement of the private sector, which resulted in fierce debates about the dubious material and aesthetic quality of what came to stand for the image of Hungarian villages and suburbs, including many districts at the peripheries of Budapest. One of the novel realizations of this chapter is that the relationship between the state and the architect is revealed as one "characterized neither by the state's total control over the shaping of the built environment, as evidenced by the sprawling self-help building, nor by architects' principled and tenacious resistance to state intervention into their professional jurisdiction" (100). Molnár insightfully reveals that while architects denounced the state's housing program on the grounds of the social inequalities it portended, they inadvertently supported it through their elitist position in the family house debate.

The third chapter keeps the focus on Hungary by exploring the so-called Tulip Debate of 1975-76, based on the reconsideration of the legacy of modernism in the Hungarian architectural scene. While modernism had long been regarded as the "antithesis of totalitarian architecture" (115) and a trademark of (western) democracy, a group of architects known as the Pécs Group applied such folk ornaments as the tulip onto the façades of prefab blocks to disrupt their uniformity and lend character to the buildings. This is how close, Molnár suggests, Hungarian

architects came to what had already been in vogue in the West as postmodernism. However, the Pécs Group's efforts to revitalize the legacy of vernacular tradition came in for fierce criticism by advocates of modernism who denounced such solutions to "upgrade" prefabs as populist, backward, and even outright nationalist. By way of situating the debate within the history of the urbanist-populist discourse in Hungary Molnár lucidly demonstrates how the discursive logic of the Tulip Debate identified architectural modernism with the notion of a progressive, modern society pitted against a naïve conception of a pastoral countryside. Although this chapter acknowledges the role of "new state-owned planning offices [that] were reorganized on the basis of the Soviet model" (109), a detailed discussion of the structure and the profiles of these offices would have shed even more light on the constraints and the liberties of architects in those times.

The last chapter revolves around post-wall Berlin and discusses two conflicting visions – the model of the "European city" on the one hand and that of the "American" or "global city" on the other – for the rebuilding of the unified city. Ultimately, the "European city" emerged as a design and planning benchmark that rendered the nineteenth-century city an ideal to be emulated, as opposed to the uniform, futuristic image of the "American city." The surge of interest in Berlin's pre-wall history, however, would not necessarily entail the more recent layers of the past. Rather, by way of anchoring the city's future in its nineteenth-century heritage, post-1989 German architects "hoped to avoid the failures and the ambiguity of the immediate past, particularly of the socialist, but also of the Nazi, experiment" (165). Molnár succinctly demonstrates how the exclusion of East German architects from the debate was concomitant with the exclusion of socialism from the city's architectural heritage. Although the surge of nostalgia for socialism over the past decade has led to a renewed interest in artifacts of the time, Molnár concludes that "the rehabilitation of the socialist built environment is nowhere near in sight" (168).

While reading this final chapter I could not help thinking about post-socialist Budapest, where the image of the nineteenth-century city is similarly privileged over the architectural imprint of the socialist era, though the social and political factors behind it might be different from those in Berlin. Although a more conventional, comparative approach would have offered intriguing results in such cases, Molnár's experimental method allows her to capture and interpret "causal processes rather than establishing an abstract causal relationship among a set of variables." The book's four chapters therefore "yield a whole that is eventually greater than the sum of its parts" (24). The particular social and cultural processes that are laid bare through the lens of Hungary and East Germany beg the question as to what extent these processes could be traced in other Central European countries as well and thus set the stage for future research, involving more countries of the region. Without doubt, Molnár's original approach to the interrelation of state, architecture, and society is a highly valuable contribution to the study of Central Europe, offering an indispensable resource for sociologists, historians, architectural historians, as well as students and scholars of Hungarian cultural studies, to name only a few, with an interest in the region.